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E.O. 12958: DECL: 3/28/2017  
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UNSC  
SUBJECT: FRENCH PUT CONTACT GROUP ON INDEFINITE HOLD  
REF: STATE 36202

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, reasons  
1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (S) Summary: On March 27, Herve Besancenot, MFA  
DAS-equivalent for the Levant, gave an equivocal response to  
reftel demarche, claiming that the Quai's position had  
remained consistent: the French support the Contact Group in  
theory, but the timing must be handled carefully because of  
the extremely delicate political situation in Lebanon.  
Besancenot then explained that the French were unpersuaded by  
reports of Hizballah's rearmament, and therefore felt no  
urgency about convening the Contact Group. "Taking into full  
account the sensitivity of the situation . . . we want to see  
how things evolve before being tied down to a date,"  
Besancenot said, although the clear subtext was that no time  
is a good time from the Quai's perspective.

12. (S) Summary, ct'd: Besancenot revealed that, after Post  
delivered reftel demarche to the MFA on March 22, with a  
clear explanation that, as a gesture of good faith to ensure  
the invitation addressed France's concerns, the Department  
would refrain from inviting others until hearing back from  
the French, the Quai took advantage of an EU Quintet meeting  
the following day to line up the other Quintet members  
against the proposed Contact Group meeting. The MFA's  
repeated attempts to thwart USG efforts to convene a Contact  
Group may presage a change in France's Lebanon policy in the  
post-Chirac era if the MFA's traditional Arabists succeed in  
having their way with the new president; see comment paras  
11-12 for analysis. End summary.

French Position "Has Not Changed"

13. (C) Poloff delivered reftel demarche to Remy Bouallegue,  
MFA Desk Officer for Lebanon, and Jean-Christophe Auge, Desk  
Officer for Syria, on March 22. In a follow-up meeting on  
March 23, Auge asked that the USG hold off on sending out  
further invitations to the Contact Group until Monday, March  
26, while the MFA "ironed out some administrative questions."  
After receiving no response on March 26, Poloff met with MFA  
DAS-equivalent for the Levant Herve Besancenot on March 27,  
at which point Besancenot shared the MFA's official response,  
which he said had just been cabled to the French Embassy in  
Paris.

14. (C) Besancenot conceded that he was aware of Washington's  
"perception" that the French had repeatedly changed their  
mind concerning the timing and venue of the first Contact  
Group meeting. However, Besancenot continued, the French  
position has remained constant: the French support the

Contact Group in principle, but the timing must be handled carefully given the extremely delicate political situation in Lebanon. Besancenot asserted this was still the MFA's position, although his subsequent remarks made it clear that the MFA was unlikely to agree to any meeting of the Contact Group in the near future.

#### Key Questions

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15. (S) Besancenot then shared several questions which he said might be usefully discussed within the context of the Contact Group. First, what is the real nature of Hizballah's rearmament? He emphasized that the French are skeptical of Israeli claims that Hizballah is rearming south of the Litani (claims which he dismissed as "manipulative"), and added that he found the intel shared per reftel "unpersuasive."

16. (C) Second, what can the UNSC contribute to reinforce the arms embargo? Besancenot said tightening control of the Lebanese-Syrian border would require both air and ground units, but added that the French are convinced that the only way to truly end Hizballah's rearmament is via a political solution that addresses other issues ("including Sheba'a Farms), not a security or military solution. He said we should also exert pressure on Syria and Iran to comply with the embargo, not just the GOL, which cannot control its own borders.

17. (C) Third, how to limit Hizballah's rearmament without weakening the GOL? Besancenot made the case that enforcing the arms embargo is not worth risking the collapse of the Siniora government.

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18. (C) "Taking into full account the sensitivity of the situation . . . we want to see how things evolve before being tied down to a date. We shouldn't create an artificial sense of urgency. If the Contact Group were to meet, it would be essential not to feed the opposition's claims that an international cabal of Western states is determining Lebanon's future, so the meeting would have to be very discreet, with no public statement afterwards. Even if Siniora were to agree to some sort of stronger border controls, such as a monitoring mission, he would need something to balance that, such as an Israeli withdrawal from Sheba'a Farms. So the Contact Group should talk about implementation of UNSCR 1701 in its entirety," added Besancenot.

#### We Push Back

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19. (C) Poloff registered strong disagreement with Besancenot's arguments, noting that the French have repeatedly reversed themselves and have never given us a convincing and straightforward explanation of their reluctance to convene the Contact Group. At the same time, we have bent over backwards to accommodate their putative concerns; this latest response only deepens our frustration. In a follow-up conversation with Besancenot on March 28, Poloff cautioned that the French Embassy in Washington appeared to have given the Quai an overly rosy account of the Department's reaction to the French response, and emphasized our perception that the French dealt with us in bad faith by using the March 23 EU Quintet meeting to rally opposition to the Contact Group proposal.

110. (C) Based on discussions with EUR and NEA, Post understands that efforts are underway to find an appropriate opportunity to express to Ambassador Levitte our deep unhappiness about how the French have handled the Contact Group proposal. Post concurs with this approach. We assess that further protest on our part would be futile at this point and possibly counter-productive, as it would serve to

unravel the hitherto close cooperation between the USG and France on Lebanon policy.

Comment: A French Policy Change Ahead?

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¶11. (S) Comment: Despite Besancenot's protests, it is clear that the French have repeatedly attempted to delay, and ultimately thwart, our efforts to convene the Contact Group. Neither Besancenot's arguments, nor France's ever-present force protection concerns with respect to the French peacekeepers in Lebanon, adequately explain the MFA's reluctance to play ball. Based on the many discussions we have had with the MFA over the past few months, Post suspects that Jean Felix-Pagagnon, the MFA NEA A/S equivalent, has been the driving force behind the Quai's unhelpful behavior. This may presage an attempt to return France's Lebanon policy to what some Quai officials see as its natural center of gravity in the aftermath of the Chirac presidency. Specifically, we suspect that the Quai may advise France's president-elect to "de-personalize" France's Lebanon policy by putting some daylight between Paris and the March 14 majority. In addition, we anticipate that the Quai will advocate some sort of diplomatic opening to Hizballah as a means of restoring France's "neutral" image. Moreover, we suspect that the MFA will "reconcile" itself to a watering-down of the statutes establishing the International Tribunal; the MFA's Lebanon desk officer (who we suspect is parroting a line he has heard from Besancenot and Felix-Pagagnon) has rhetorically asked us several times in recent weeks whether it is "worth sacrificing the state of Lebanon on the altar of the international tribunal?" Finally, even Chirac's personal Middle East advisor, Dominique Boche, concedes that regardless of who wins the presidential election, France's next president will inevitably send some sort of envoy to Damascus in a bid to change the tenor of Franco-Syrian relations.

¶12. (C) While this analysis is speculative (when asked, our MFA contacts continue to insist that the broad contours of France's Lebanon policy will not change after Chirac's departure), our sense is that Chirac is already facing considerable resistance at the Quai as he tries to ensure the creation of the International Tribunal before his term expires. We may need to engage quickly, and at the highest level, with France's next President to ensure that the tight cooperation between our two governments on Lebanon does not

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fall victim to the preferences of the MFA's career Arabists once Chirac is no longer on the scene.

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